

## Reed Elsevier and the arms trade revisited

The Royal College of Physicians is gravely concerned that the publishers of *The Lancet*, Reed Elsevier, continue to be commercially involved in the promotion and sale of arms through trade fairs, and calls on them to divest themselves of such interests. *The Lancet* is one of the most respected international medical journals and should not be linked to an industry involved in weapons designed to cause physical harm and death, and often used against civilians. This involvement represents a conflict of interest that threatens the reputation of *The Lancet* and undermines its role in improving health and health care worldwide.

Michael Pelly, \*Ian Gilmore  
ian.gilmore@rcplondon.ac.uk

Royal College of Physicians, 11 St Andrews Place,  
Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE, UK

We would like to express our concern that the publishers of *The Lancet*, Reed Elsevier, are continuing to promote the use of arms by hosting arms trade fairs. The recent Shooting, Hunting, and Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Show<sup>1</sup> hosted by Reed Exhibitions was devoted to the glorification of guns; shortly the company is to host an arms fair to the Middle East at a time when the region is the focus of international tension. In the past, manufacturers of cluster bombs have been allowed to participate in such events<sup>2</sup> despite the indiscriminate effect of cluster bombs on civilian and military populations. Although we do not question the right of nations to arm themselves appropriately against potentially hostile threats, much of the trade connected with arms does not fulfil this purpose.

Global expenditure on arms is now over US\$1 trillion per year,<sup>3</sup> amounting to around 2.5% of global gross domestic product. It consumes limited resources which could help fund sectors such as health and

education and support productive economic activities. Many arms end up in the poorest countries where they contribute to the breakdown of law and order and undermine governance. Although precise estimates of the deaths from arms are not available, it has been suggested that around 500 000 people die every year as a result of firearms.<sup>4</sup> Most are innocent civilians caught up in conflict or crime.

In view of the major contribution of arms trading to the undermining of public health and international development, we wish to add our support to the courageous stand taken by *The Lancet* in asking Reed Elsevier to divest itself from these unsavoury activities.<sup>2</sup> We note that the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has recently sold all its shares in Reed Elsevier after 3 years of critical engagement on the company's role in the arms trade. We hope that other shareholders will continue to raise these concerns, and we look forward to a public response from the company.

Oona Campbell, Michel Coleman,  
Simon Cousens, Pat Doyle,  
Diana Elbourne, Stephen Evans,  
Suzanne Filteau, Paul E M Fine,  
Judith R Glynn, Emily Grundy,  
\*Andy Haines, Andrew J Hall,  
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Paul Milligan, Anne Mills,  
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Egbert Sondorp, Bianca De Stavola,  
Ian M Timæus, Gill Walt,  
John Whittaker, Paul Wilkinson,  
Basia Zaba  
andy.haines@lshtm.ac.uk

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine,  
Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK

1 The 2007 SHOT Show. <http://www.shotshow.org/App/homepage.cfm?moduleid=1968&apnname=100300>.

2 The Lancet and The Lancet Editorial Advisory Board. Reed Elsevier and the arms trade. *Lancet* 2005; **366**: 868.

3 Stålenheim P, Fruchart D, Omitoogun W, Perdomo C. Military expenditure, chapter 8. SIPRI Yearbook 2006: armaments, disarmament and international security. Oxford University Press on behalf of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2006.

4 Arya N. Confronting the small arms pandemic. *BMJ* 2002; **324**: 990–91.

*The Lancet* has a distinguished track record of drawing attention to the consequences of war and violence. Yet its publisher, Reed Elsevier, has a subsidiary that hosts one of the largest military exhibitions in the world (Defence Systems and Equipment International [DSEI]).

Reed Elsevier does not need *The Lancet* to highlight its inconsistencies. It is a signatory of the UN Global Compact<sup>1</sup> which includes a commitment to “the rights to life, liberty and security”. Reed Elsevier’s “Socially Responsible Supplier Group”<sup>2</sup> includes a “comprehensive environmental survey” but I could not find any reference to the collateral damage of cluster munitions, although there were an estimated 15 cluster bomb manufacturers at the last DSEI in 2005.

The issue is not about the availability of weapons, which is a wider debate. The issue is that weapons of dubious legality are being sold in a market atmosphere to rival “the top shows worldwide” so that “the cross-fertilization of business”<sup>3</sup> can take place and massive profits can be made. This is not the way to ensure the human security of any of the world’s citizens.

The marketplace is changing and business and government are gradually being held more accountable. Reed Elsevier could show true corporate responsibility by anticipating these trends and disposing of all interests that threaten human—and especially civilian—life and wellbeing. If not, we have to urge *The Lancet* to find another publisher, and Reed Elsevier’s shareholders to examine their investments.

Marion Birch  
marionbirch@medact.org



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